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ABSTRACT

Two college writing teachers share their viewpoint that people outside the academic setting often misunderstand the time-consuming activities involved with responding to student writing. They agree that teachers should envision evaluation as conducting a conversation with the writer of the essay. The key component of this conversation, depending on the approach to writing instruction, can be either self-disclosure, or asking questions and commenting in such a way that students will rethink their writing. The role of evaluator of student writing is always lurking in the background of any written comments, despite whatever approach is taken. Open questions are useful for prompting students to explore an issue in more detail, or to consider counter examples which might enlarge the range of reasoning. The question of whether or not an instructor can respond to student writing in a non-judgmental way is widely debated by teachers. Good writing teachers must foster the ability to listen reflectively to what the student is trying to say. To balance this, however, teachers should exhort their students to remember the reader by encouraging the reader to keep on reading. College freshmen have often come to dislike English and writing classes. Thus, one other goal should be to teach students to like writing, and consequently to let them know that a writing teacher believes in them as communicators. (HB)

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Responding to Student Essays: A Conversation

Darrell:

When I tell people I am a writing teacher, they usually remark that it must be an easy life, what with "just a few papers to grade every once in a while." I used to try to explain that responding to student essays was not like grading a multiple choice history exam or a bubble sheet math test, and was quite time consuming and tedious. To explain the difference, I found myself referring to what I did with my students' essays as not grading, in the sense of finding what was right and what was wrong, but rather as engaging each one of them separately in dialogue, as if I were having a conversation with them through their essays. And I realized that in many ways this is exactly what happens when I respond to student essays--with each one I must enter into a new conversation with a new subject, a new speaker, and new rules.

Sandra:

I agree that responding is often like conversation. For me, the number one ingredient of a successful conversation is self disclosure.

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Darrell:

Self disclosure does have its place in conversation and writing, but it is not the principal component, especially for someone who is in a teacher or facilitator role. The key component then is not self-disclosure but rather asking questions or making comments to students in such a way as to make them reevaluate or elaborate on their thinking, or to suggest a possible stylistic improvement. To think of "self-disclosure" as being the most important ingredient in conversation seems awfully narcissistic and would make for a boring conversation. Further, my students are not required to "know me well" as a person to benefit from my comments to them regarding their essays. I am a writing teacher, not a therapist. My job is to offer advice and techniques which will help them to express more clearly whatever it is they wish to express. That is what I have studied and continue to learn how to do. I do not presume to force them into personal or psychological revelations which are none of my business and seem to have little to do with improving their ability to generate ideas about a subject, to organize their thinking into a comprehensible model, and to use language to reveal and relate that thinking to an audience.

My point was to suggest that grading and responding to writing is more involved and complicated than grading in other more objective subject areas. My comparison to conversation was offered as a trope or metaphor, suggesting that I must have 50 or 75 separate conversations going on at once, a demanding task for

anyone.

Sandra:

Darrell, I believe, just as you do, that good teaching can be compared to good conversation, but I still maintain that self-disclosure is the first ingredient of good conversation, good teaching and even good writing. I should say here that the writing I teach is writing for exploration, which is different from what you teach, which is writing for communication.

In the classroom, because I am a writer with the students as well as a teacher of the students, I find myself on one side or the other of conversation all the time. When I am the teacher, I disclose who I am and what my thoughts are by responding to the content in student papers. When I am a writer, I disclose who I am and what my thoughts are through text about the subject I am focusing on. For each participant to confidently engage in a two-way conversation, a certain equality of disclosure needs to be established .

Self-disclosure for me involves three of the five elements I have identified in good exploratory writing: SELF-INVOLVEMENT, RISK, and THOUGHT. SELF-INVOLVEMENT is commitment to engage yourself with the subject and to disclose yourself as an individual. RISK is a willingness to think in new and unpredictable ways, often against commonly held beliefs. THOUGHT is the source and development of new and individual ideas. I think that self-disclosure is the number one ingredient of

discourse, because without it there can be no conversation, no exploratory writing.

As a teacher, I am committed to respond to student writing with the purpose of helping each student accomplish his or her personal writing goal. I'm committed to exposing what I think about what the student has written, but that does not mean simply evaluating the student's craft. Rather, it means that if a student writes about Montana blizzards, I might comment about a blizzard I've lived through in Colorado, or if a student writes about the adrenalin high he likes to get jumping over waterfalls, I might ask a lot of questions as I try to understand some of this experience. In other words, I acknowledge the student's experience by sharing some of my experience or responding with genuine human interest to something I don't understand, both of which include exposing some of myself. If a student's writing is on a controversial subject, I might state my opinion, even though it may contrary to that of the student, but I would never make little of the student's opinion in doing so. I show myself as another person with a valid opinion for the purpose of encouraging and furthering the thought process of exploration.

On an exploration, the student ENGAGES THE SELF with a subject, generates ideas to write about through RISKING new thought on paper, that is, thinking about a subject in a way never tried before. The student then continues the THOUGHT process on the page, developing an idea to a point where it is fully understood.

Okay, so that is self-disclosure in my conversation/writing paradigm.

Yes, I agree with you that responding to student writing is like engaging in conversation, and it is hard work. It may seem that I sidestepped your point about the hard work of grading English papers. I did so intentionally. I didn't want to talk about poor-over-worked-me, the English teacher in the traditional sense, so I manipulated the conversation to an aspect of the subject where we would be talking about what I wanted to talk about.

And now I want to talk about CURIOSITY in responding and writing. Curiosity corresponds to the open question ingredient of a good conversation. Darrell, how do you use open questions when responding to student writing?

Darrell:

Now this is more like it. But before I respond to your question about questions, I don't quite understand how you can "help students achieve their writing goals" as you state by "exposing what I think about the writing a student does" without making some kind of judgement and evaluating what the student has done. Surely, you realize that given your role in the classroom as teacher or facilitator that students respond to your comments--however disguised they might appear--as evaluative criticism? Or do you not offer any constructive advice?

I think that what you don't realize or won't admit is that

you ARE influencing what students do with their writing, merely by the fact that they know you are going to read what they have written and give them a grade at some point. So why pretend you are not grading or evaluating? There seems to be a kind of trickery here. Since you are, and the university and the community would agree, trained and proven as a writer and teacher of writing, why deny that you have something to offer students besides a pretense of "not evaluating" when that is exactly what you are doing? It seems everyone would benefit if, as a writing teacher, you would teach writing.

Now as to using open questions to respond to student writing, I often use questions to prompt students to explore an issue in more detail or I offer a counter example which might create a wider range of reasoning. I use the same kind of questions I might ask if I were having a serious conversation and were attempting to determine the range and depth of my fellow conversationalist's knowledge and understanding of what we were discussing. I also use less open, more specific questions to sharpen the focus of what has been said; in a sense to recast a vague, ill-formed concept into a more precise and context-bound statement. I guess, in a way, I question skeptically in an attempt to learn more. With my student's writing, however, the goal is to lead them to greater clarity and specificity. With each essay, with each student, there is a new set of "right" answers, since each essay is a unique instance of subject, audience, and writer interaction. And since my role/job is to

offer advice which will help the student better reach his or her writing goal, with each essay I have to figure out the best way for the writer to express this message as well as assume the role of "reader's advocate" to insure the message is clear and understandable.

Sandra:

What do you mean, "Now this is more like it"? Are you evaluating our conversation? Evaluating my participation in our discussion? Do I have to be careful, really careful in what I say now and how I say it in order to gain your approval as we continue?

You see, that is exactly what I try to avoid. When I respond to student writing, I do so in a non-judgemental way. I do not respond to the product (how the student has said something), but rather to the content of what the student has written, with the purpose of furthering the student's thinking. I don't want to shut off further exploration of a developing idea with trivial concern about how a writer is trying to communicate with me.

I don't pretend I'm not going to evaluate the students sometime during the semester. They know I will; I know I will, but the basis for evaluation is an objective set of criteria that the student has access to throughout the semester. At midterm and at the end of the semester, the student, his or her peers and I particpate equally in determining an individual's grade, based

on my criteria for good exploratory writing: SELF-INVOLVEMENT, CURIOSITY, RISK, THOUGHT AND DISCOVERY. On the first day of class, I establish that these are the elements of good exploratory writing, and we work toward doing our best in each of these areas. Through establishing criteria for evaluation and through sharing responsibility for grading, I am then able to become more of a teacher of writing, and less of an evaluator of writing.

On to your thoughts on open questions. I think we agree on "prompts for more details" and "counter examples to further the content," but I'm uneasy with your idea of using probing questions with the purpose of determining the "range and depth" of the writer's knowledge. By doing this, Darrell, aren't you setting yourself up as the expert, the evaluator of content? If it's true that in your conversation-like response with the students, you are sitting in judgement of content, could it then also be true that you are making an evaluation here of my knowledge in this discussion? What if you determine that I don't have the "range and depth" you expect or desire, what are you going to do? Dismiss me, dismiss our conversation as unworthy of continuing? Give me an F?

You say you question skeptically in an attempt to learn more, but do you really engage yourself with the thoughts each student is struggling with in his or her paper? This brings me to the third and last ingredient of my conversation/good writing paradigm: <u>reflective listening</u>, which involves SELF-INVOLVEMENT

and THOUGHT. Are we listening to each other and thinking through what the other has said before we respond again? Are we, in this discussion, furthering the development of each other's ideas, or are we merely defending our own positions?

Darrell:

There is nothing wrong with having an opinion and believing in it. At least not to me. I guess, in a way, that is how I respond to my students' essays, too. I want them to express themselves and be able to support and explain why I should "listen" to what it is they have to say. And that is part of any writer's role: to motivate the reader to keep reading. The writer must do this by demonstrating adequate or unique knowledge of the subject matter, by establishing an interesting and trustworthy voice, by using rhetorical appeals or strategies, or by speaking (again as in conversation) to the reader in an artful or engaging style.

Remember the reader!! Lisa Ede offers this model for writers:

> They think about their own purposes and intentions--the meanings they want to convey to readers. They reflect on the image of themselves, the writer's persona, that they want to create in their writing. They consider the needs, interests, and expectations of their readers. (11)

I guess I not only require the "exploratory" stage you do, but

also insist that my students craft what they have discovered so that it will function for a reader. I think that for a college-level composition course this is vital; otherwise, we're just promoting diary writing.

For me, how a writer attempts to reach me or another reader is a primary concern, and not, as you put it, "a trivial concern for how a writer is trying to communicate with me." I thought that writing, as well as conversation, was an attempt to communicate. How can you not be concerned with how your students present what they have discovered? Isn't that at least half of what writing or conversing is all about?

Sandra:

In my first-year writing classes, I teach exploratory writing, and I focus very little on the presentation because my experience has been that students in secondary schools have been taught "presentation" of thought before they have been exposed to concern for content and ideas. Students come into first-year college writing, having been forced to take English classes in high school where the instruction often focused on punctuation, syntax, subject/verb agreement, structure, organization, word choice, clarity and elegance. Their experience is that of having been forced to communicate, communicate correctly, without having cared about or even understood fully what they were communicating.

Generally, they don't like English. They don't <u>like</u>

writing. They don't do writing. They understand writing to be an activity that is either right or wrong according to a set of rules. Well, writing is not about this set of rules; writing can never be right or wrong. Writing is about thinking, and it is only after thoughts have been generated, read, expanded, revised, responded to and revised again and again that a writer should concern him or herself with the mechanics of the craft of writing. In one semester of writing, students do not have time to do all of this, so I have chosen to give students in my classes an opportunity to think, an opportunity they may never have had before. The grade they receive is based on expansion, on possibility, on self-involvement, on movement toward DISCOVERY, which is the fifth element and goal of good exploratory writing.

I teach my courses with the intent that my students finish the semester liking to write. They do. And then when their ideas are ready for formal communication, the students each have a copy of a writer's handbook for applying the rules they have learned over and over again through secondary school. They also know where the university writing center is should they have any questions on how to apply these rules.

Most importantly though, when students leave my class, they have had an experience in writing that has been positive, and they have confidence in themselves as individuals, which I hope will, combined with some sense of thinking, contribute to successful college careers and lives on this complicated finite

earth. I guess you could say that I believe in the students I teach, and I'm willing to risk ignoring the rules for one semester because of this belief.

Darrall:

Well, I believe in my students too. You don't think I'm in this for the money do you? I also believe that conversations like ours are important for teachers, as it is too easy to fall into habits and not think about the why's of what we do in the classroom. The more I talk with other writing teachers the more I learn, especially that there is no one best way to go about it and that perhaps I'll never even come close.

How's that for risk and self-disclosure?

Sandra:

Uh, huh.

Works Cited

Ede, Lisa. Work in Progress. New York: St. Martin's, 1992.